

Marek Pokorný: They Thought We Were Alive and They Run Screaming

Translated by Marta Darom

Curatorial statement for the exhibition.

They Thought We Were Alive and They Run
Screaming
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The exhibition *They Thought We Were Alive and They Run Screaming*¹ is part of a loose series called *The Real Show*, conceived by Agnes Violeau and Céline Poulin as an opportunity to develop on the theme—gradually, individually and in the context of the dramaturgy of galleries operating in different parts of Europe—of the mechanisms of popularity. The first part of the series, whose various forms are guided by the principles of the film and television industry that capitalize on the success of a particular film or series (see Protocol), took place at the Centre d'art contemporain (Contemporary Art Center) in Brétigny, France. Other parts were prepared by PLATO Ostrava, the Sandwich Gallery in Bucharest, and the Latvian Center for Contemporary Art in Riga.

The Real Show series does not aim to define popularity as such, but instead to explore various aspects of this phenomenon, especially in relation to media and genres that offer the agents, at least seemingly, the possibility of occupying a relatively free position in the field of show. However, popularity is exploited not only by mass media—from large media groups to Youtubers—but also by multinational corporations and political entities which use it to acquire an authority capable of influencing our feelings as well as our social and political behavior. Anonymity, then, as the opposite of popularity, is from the perspective of control a feared state (or, conversely, a desired state) providing a safe haven for the subjects. Contrary to this normative dynamics, popularity allows for a public formation and sharing of certain gestures, songs, and other cultural acts, and to create communities and propose alternative representations of them. Each of the exhibitions in the series is conceived as an

independent curatorial project with its own specific focus and differently formulated problem which takes a fresh look at the theme of popularity.

The exhibition *They Thought We Were Alive and They Run Screaming* is thus a concretization of the general framework of the project, working with the phenomenon of “self-staging”, i.e. putting oneself on the stage. In the Czech context, self-staging can be put in context with the term “self-scene”, at least if we use the term “scening”, which the theater theorist Jaroslav Vostrý advocates in his theory of art. This widespread (and of course not new) practice seems to have become a kind of social norm, a requirement, an imperative of public existence—whether it is self-staging as an internally accepted and unconscious part of the habitus or, on the contrary, as a fully aware dramaturgy of the person/subject who, through it, comes to accept the world as an incessant stream of competing forms and images. Therefore, we see self-staging as a principle used strategically and abundantly to build one’s popularity. However, we do not perceive it negatively. It interests us as a tool for a very specific construction of one’s identity, as a suitable means of self-examination and knowledge, but also as a strategy of self-affirmation, a possibility to get rid of the burden of the insecure self and replace it with a controlled self-image, as a basic part of the socialization process, but also as a possible starting point for a criticism of widely accepted social norms.

In self-staging, the gaze and reaction of others are of primordial importance. To some extent, voyeurism, the compulsive gaze, the attempt to capture a person at the moment when they fall out of their role, are not aware of themselves and do not act in a stylized manner, or leave the scene and cease to control the means used for their self-staging, can all be understood as an analog phenomenon. The exhibition, therefore, focuses primarily on the internal tension and dialectic of this process, or—to put it another way—the exhibition attempts to capture, at the level of a staged experience, the moments of transition between the controlled construction of the self-image (and its compulsive or normative control) and its disintegration. Or, to put it differently: the exhibition focuses on the impossibility to separate the stage design of the self and its obscenity. The seam that binds them, and in which the “truth” of the subject as a social, political and media entity sometimes appears, is fluid and we often perceive it incidentally only: as a phase that comes and goes at the same time. It is, however, pointed out by certain works of art or artistic strategies, which provide us either with an understanding of our own situation as a staging subject or with a feeling of powerlessness in the face of the necessity of self-staging.

Other works of art, on the other hand, become the starting point for an active, deliberate appropriation of, or resistance to, some of the tactics of self-staging. Here, self-staging oscillates between social, personal, ethical, aesthetic and political practices. Most importantly, the exhibition attempts to create a kind of stage on which the interaction of varied artworks keeps the process of self-staging and its dissolution in the game and enables us to gain a specific kind of knowledge from which melancholy is born as a stasis in the moment when the subject manages to momentarily glimpse the nature of the world.

The composition of the exhibition is based on the juxtaposition of three works of art, which—in a way—are already part of history. They are Martha Rosler's canonical video *Semiotics of the Kitchen* from 1975, which is a feminist persiflage of contemporary instructional reality TV shows; the film *Self-Portrait* (filmed in 1971, final edit in 2012) by Lebanese artist Simone Fattal in which the artist, in turn, explores her “authentic” self through an initially several-hour-long live performance in front of the camera, and finally, Markéta Othová's monumental photographic series *Talk to Her* (2006), whose focus is the singer Björk captured offstage among a group of friends.

Other works selected for the exhibition represent different aspects of conscious self-staging on a scale between the authentic and the instrumental, the reflective and the subconscious, the affirmative and the critical. The contribution by the Polish project Kem School—and a central part of the exhibition—that will be primarily performative and participatory, shows self-staging as a means of a learning process based on the principle of unschooling. The seemingly unmotivated stagnation, the melancholy of the exhibition title, is a key moment in the process of (self-)knowledge. It is a non-discursive moment in which a certain dilemma arises in front of us. By accepting it, we can perhaps come to terms with the impossibility of being seen and perceived by others in a way that corresponds exactly to the self-image we have created, including the awareness of general patterns that cannot be escaped when choosing self-staging strategies.

The Ostrava exhibition *They Thought We Were Alive and They Run Screaming* focuses on (self-)staging as a principle essential for building and gaining popularity, but whose deeper truth lies in the social, existential, and political circumstances of its use, and above all in the cracks in the self-image through which these push themselves onto the stage. Thus, through the interaction of artworks and projects that were created in different contexts and with different intentions, the exhibition explores the dialectics of the construction of a self-image primarily determined by the gaze of others and its

ongoing disintegration. The exhibition is an ambiguous commentary on the possibilities of alternative representations that derive their effect from the mechanisms of popularity.

Marek Pokorný

1. The title is a paraphrase of a verse from the poem *Everything Passes* by Giorgos Seferis. ↩

